

How to Obtain a Great SLOR

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What follows are some recommendations intended for medical students applying for an Emergency Medicine residency. The goal is to provide some clarity on the letters of recommendation provided in EM. First of all, your letter writers who are EM faculty will likely be writing you a Standardized Letter of Recommendation, a “SLOR”. The advantage of these letters over traditional letters is that the writer is explicitly tasked with comparing your attributes to those of your applicant peers in areas of great interest to EM Program Directors. This is to your benefit as the decision to offer an interview often hinges on clinical performance and the EM letters that actually speak to that performance. Otherwise, Program Directors would be left to choose applicants to interview based only on Board Scores, Transcripts, and Personal Statements.

The SLOR itself is a pre-set Emergency Medicine Residency Recommendation Form that the letter writer fills out on your behalf. The first section establishes the credentials of the letter writer, specifies the nature of their contact with you, and summarizes your performance on their rotation. They are asked to include their current role in their department. This means that letters from EM Residency Program Directors, Clerkship Directors, and Department Chair’s can carry more weight. These are faculty directly involved in resident education, just like the audience reading the letter. They will also designate the nature of their contact with you. In addition to any time spent on advising or non-clinical education it is important that you worked together clinically. If your letter writer is an EM faculty member who is not part of the residency leadership, it is important that you work with them extensively (more than 10 hours) to add more depth to their evaluation of your clinical skills. To shed some perspective on the overall quality of your performance on their rotation your grade is included along with a sample evaluator comment. Also noted are the dates of your rotation, whether it was your first, second, third, etc., EM rotation, and the typical grade distribution for that rotation, to put your grade in context.

In the second section of the SLOR they are asked to compare you to your peers. Several of these questions ask them to put you in one of four categories: Outstanding (top 10% of applicants), Excellent (top $\frac{1}{3}$), Very Good (middle $\frac{1}{3}$), and Good (bottom $\frac{1}{3}$). Your goal is to be rated in one of the top two categories, though it is important to remember that it is not just the top third of applicants who will match in Emergency Medicine.

The first area where they are asked to compare you to your peers is in your commitment to EM and whether you have adequately thought out this career decision. In the ED, your enthusiasm for patient care should be evident and you should be clearly interested in learning the EM perspective on patient care. When talking to your letter writers you should be able to articulate what drew you to this field and what personal attributes you possess that will allow you to excel.

Your overall work ethic and ability to assume care of your patients is the next area evaluated. The outstanding student pushes themselves in the clinical setting and takes ownership of their patients. As a resident you will have to follow up on tests, reevaluate your patients, and keep them, their families, your supervisors, primary care doctors, and consultants up to date and involved in the progress of their evaluation and management. Being able to do this as a student will separate you from your peers.

An equally important area they are asked to evaluate is your ability to efficiently assess a patient and generate a differential diagnosis and management plan that is appropriate to the ED. How you present your patients will have a huge impact on their assessment of your clinical skills. This cannot be emphasized strongly enough. Your case presentations should be efficient, focused, and accurate. You should only include the information that is pertinent to the patient's chief complaint, including both pertinent positives and negatives. You should always include your differential and plan. Your differential should focus on that which is dangerous and that which is common. Your plan should be executable within the limitations of the ED resources, and should include treatment of the patient's symptoms.

Your letter writers are then asked to rate your interpersonal skills, both how you interact with the department staff and with patients and their families. The student with superior interpersonal skills draws unsolicited praise from those they interact with. Be professional in all of your interactions. Always keep the patient and their family informed. Treat all of the ED staff like colleagues. Having a sense of humor is an asset in a chaotic environment like the ED, but remember, you are in a professional setting. Most importantly, let people know you care and are interested in what they have to teach you whether they are an attending, nurse, ancillary staff member, or a patient.

This section closes with the letter writer's opinion of your overall potential as a trainee in Emergency Medicine and an estimate of how much support you will need to fulfill that projection. Your residency will be tasked with training you but Program Directors are looking for students who are self-motivated adult learners. Read about your patients and share what you learn. Take it upon yourself to provide solutions to problems. Complete all tasks that are assigned to you in a timely fashion, whether they are clinical or administrative.

The final standardized section in the SLOR is where your letter writer is asked to sum all of your attributes up and give you a global ranking compared with your peers applying to EM. The same top 10%, top ⅓, middle ⅓, and lower ⅓ scale is used here. They are also asked to estimate how competitive you will be positioned on their institutions Rank List. The student who receives Excellent and Outstanding overall rankings and who is Very Competitive on the rank list has done all of the following:

- Shown genuine interest and enthusiasm for our specialty
- Worked hard and taken responsibility for their patients care
- Functioned like an Intern on the team
- Focused their presentations to the chief complaint and included a differential and plan appropriate to the ED
- Exemplified kindness and professionalism in all of your interactions

The SLOR closes with written comments from the letter writer. This gives them the opportunity to add clarity and depth to their assessment. Help your letter writers get to know you. Meet with them outside of the ED to discuss your experiences and goals. Provide them with your curriculum vitae and a copy of your personal statement. The better they know you the better they can represent you in the application process.

One last note: The SLOR ends with a statement that the student has waived their right to see the letter. You are not required to do this but a recommendation screened by the applicant carries little weight. If you have chosen your letter writers well this should not be a concern.